

Dear St. Mary Families,

As we approach the end of November and enter the holiday season, we would like to update you on the status of our phased return-to-campus plan for St. Mary middle school students (6-8 grade) and their families.

First, we would like to thank you again for your cooperation adjusting to our new protocols. We know that sending your children to school in face coverings, completing the daily COVID-19 attestation, and waiting in line at drop-off and pick-up are extra procedures and not ideal. However, these protocols and the others we have put into practice on campus are making a difference. At the same time, we are also acutely aware of the challenges that remote learning presents to your students and families. Although the experience of learning online has been greatly enhanced with layers of technological tools and support, we know this mode of learning is not as effective as in-person instruction.

Simply put, in-person learning is the [best possible scenario for children](#). There is a wealth of evidence that shows the more time spent outside of school increases the risk of social, emotional, and mental health harm and affects their ability to truly learn.

As you know, our protocols have been working extremely well, and we have had only 2 positive cases of COVID-19 in the school since school began. That's a tribute to a thoughtful and thorough reopening strategy, careful planning, an abundance of caution, and the school's commitment to the health and safety of your children and our faculty and staff. Moreover, the two infections identified in our school were not acquired here. They were actually acquired within the community and the household. Due to our diligence, none of the quarantined students acquired COVID, and all are healthy and have safely returned to school.

While positive cases have never been higher, the St. Mary administration is confident we can phase in our remaining students in the coming weeks safely. If we maintain our deliberate and intentional course, and families do their part at home, this can be successful. With stringent safety measures in place, the benefits of bringing our last phase of students on campus outweigh postponing our 6-8 grade return to campus, as [schools are not a main place of transmission](#). As a matter of fact, children are more likely to get infected outside of the classroom.

Thankfully, phasing is not uncharted territory for us. Since the start of this school year, we have been bringing staff and students into our building in phases safely. The strict safety and health protocols that are in place have a proven track record of success. Our data is not unique, and information from across the state continues to support the conclusion that in-person learning under specific health department guidelines can be accomplished safely.

Because of this, and because of the physical layout of the campus and our current enrollment and staffing levels, we believe we can bring the 6-8 grade students back to school--should families choose to return their student/s to on-site instruction.

Therefore, St. Mary Catholic School is tentatively planning for a **6th-8th grade return to campus on Monday, December 14th**. Even though this return date is only a week from the start of Christmas break, we believe it is still very important to welcome the students who choose to return to in-person instruction back at this time, so these students can acclimate to new spaces, expectations, and protocols before the new year.

For those families and students who choose not to return in person out of choice or necessity, our robust remote learning plan will continue to be offered. You have the right to choose to continue to work from home, and we fully respect your decision to do so.

For the final phase of our St. Mary return-to-campus plan to be successful, it is vital that all families follow social distancing guidelines away from school--especially regarding travel and holiday planning. Also, please continue to carefully follow the symptom flowchart which is attached to this email. Otherwise, adding more students on campus and staying open are potentially jeopardized. Our schools are a part of the community, and if the community is not doing their part to lower the infection rate, it's going to affect our schools eventually.

Just so you know, many school closure decisions have come down to one factor of late: whether there's enough staff to operate classrooms. Districts and schools are experiencing staffing shortages because of employees being out sick themselves or quarantining because of exposure to other infected people. This is causing schools to close and revert back to remote learning exclusively. If this should happen, or we are required by the governor to close our doors to students in person, we are prepared to offer our excellent remote learning platform to all our students for as long as necessary. Obviously, we would prefer to keep our doors open and to serve our students in person. To keep our students, faculty, staff, and all our families safe, we must all do our part.

Thank you again for your patience, understanding, and prayers as we work together to provide quality Catholic education for your children.

With hope,

Ben Walker

Principal
St. Mary Catholic School